

THE SCIENCE OF Doe Hunting

By Ron Wilson

Stories of wide- and high-eared does are not told around campfires. Corny songs are not sung about them on the radio in November as hunters travel to secret hunting spots named after big bucks, first bucks, memorable bucks, bucks that got away.

Does, the females of the species, are considered second-best, a consolation prize by many hunters today. Even though, as the old adage goes, when it comes time to cook the animal, it's not the antlers you eat. "A full 80 percent of all the first deer applications in our lottery are for bucks," said Randy Kreil, North Dakota Game and Fish Department wildlife division chief. "People know if they don't get a buck license in the first drawing, they can still get a doe license." And the most common complaint about North Dakota's deer season, Kreil said, is from hunters who can't get a buck license every season in the unit they hunt. "It's a simple problem of supply and demand," he said.

When it comes to managing the state's deer, however, it's the does that are king, er, queen. "The way you control the deer population is not by shooting bucks, but by shooting does," said Bill Jensen, Department big game management biologist. More than 71,500, or 58 percent, of the record 123,475 deer licenses made available this year are for antlerless deer. And nearly the same can be said for the 2002 season.

This season, like last, some North Dakota deer hunters could be

walking around with three or four licenses in their pockets. "For many areas, particularly in the eastern third of the state, we have been above management goals and we need some deer harvested," Jensen said.

This fall, the Department issued 6,200 more white-tailed deer licenses than last year. Only 50 of those licenses were for bucks, and the remaining 6,150 were for does. If the doe population is left unchecked, then there is a chance for things to get out of hand. Jensen said each adult doe will, after being bred, give birth, on average, to two fawns. So, for example, if that adult doe is not bagged this fall, by next November there will be three deer running around instead of just one. "Einstein said the eighth wonder of the world is compound interest," Jensen said.

"And the recruitment rate for deer is compound interest. What bank or mutual fund is consistently paying an interest rate of 50 percent or better?" Harvesting antlerless deer is probably the most important part of deer management, Jensen said. "We need to get a good doe harvest in order to control deer populations ... it's as simple as that," he said. "And if hunters are not doing that, if they

are not helping in the process of harvesting does, they are not fostering sound deer management."

The reasons behind the consolation prize attitude are likely many. Some hunters just don't view antlerless deer as being sporting enough; they think by shooting does that they are hurting the population, and so on. The latter likely stems from a decades-old management philosophy when doe licenses were not easy to get as wildlife managers tried to increase the state's deer herd by focusing hunter pressure away from antlerless animals.

"While we were building the deer population in North Dakota, we were conservative with the doe population, and that spawned an attitude that if you shot does, you weren't being responsible in preserving the resource," Jensen said. "Deer are a pretty forgiving species, so if you just allow them to do their thing and reproduce, they are pretty easy to manage. But once you've hit your goals and you have to start controlling the population, then it becomes much more difficult in balancing the harvest rate."

There was a time in North Dakota when doe a license was difficult to come by and considered a prize. Today, with a record 123,475 deer licenses available, landing a doe license isn't a big deal – and neither is shooting one, some hunters feel.

When Kreil was going to high school in North Dakota in the mid-1970s, hunters felt fortunate to garner a doe license as only 40,000 deer licenses in total were allotted. Times have changed. This will be the third year in a row the Department has made more than 100,000 licenses available to hunters. “Deer hunting has become that good, and hunters expect a buck license every year,” Kreil said. “The doe license has decreased in value to the hunter over time because they are easier to get.”

Jensen said he agrees that there has been a fundamental shift in attitude toward does over the years. “When I was growing up, and maybe this is misperception, but it was nice if you got a big buck,” he said. “But it was more important that you got meat.”

People had more of a tie to the land back then, Jensen said. They grew up on farms and looked at animals as something to garnish the dinner table, not adorn a wall. “Whereas now, there has been a one or two generational shift in families away from the farm, and animals aren't looked upon as utilitarian,” he said. “Hunting has become more of a social event, rekindling of family traditions, rather than a time to go out and collect meat.” In a recent survey in South Dakota where hunters were asked why they hunted, Jensen said the vast majority of the people said they did it for the camaraderie and to be with family, while only a few hunted for meat. In

many hunting units in the state today,

Jensen said biologists can conservatively estimate the buck-to-doe ratio at one buck to two adult does. Which is a good thing, at least where it's true, because scientists figure that the females are getting bred at roughly the same time of year, thus optimizing reproductive potential and the promise of survival. The 2-to-1 ratio hasn't always been the case in North Dakota. One of the reasons the Department went to a unitized deer hunting system in 1975 was that bucks in some parts of the state were getting overharvested. Which meant that some does, because of a lack of suitors, weren't getting bred in November, but as late as January.

“This late breeding resulted in the does having fawns not until August instead of June,” Jensen said. Deer born as late as August go into the upcoming winter too small, reducing their odds of survival. “The fawns that are born late are going to be the first ones coming into farms to feed in the winter and are going to be getting into trouble,” Jensen said.

Jensen said hunters need to get over the stigma of shooting does and young-of-the-year because this hunting practice is good, sound management. The promotion of doe hunting and an increase over the years of doe tags is not a ploy by the Department to simply sell more deer licenses. “I get exactly the same pay if we sell more licenses or not,” he said. “The money coming in from license sales doesn't drive the system. We issue tags to control the deer population.”

“Harvesting antlerless deer is probably the most important part of deer management.”

Jensen is a deer hunter who hunts does. Having more than one antlerless tag in his pocket allows him to spread out the season, he said. “One of things that can be done to make doe hunting more challenging, if that is an issue for some hunters, is to do it with a muzzle-loader, which I do,” he said.

When doe hunting, Kreil said his goal is to try to shoot young-of-the-year animals because they are easier to drag back to the vehicle, easier to cut up, and are good eating. “Plus, young-of-the-year are the first to die in a tough winter, which we are due to have one of these years,” he said. “Someone has to shoot does, and it should be every serious deer hunter's responsibility to harvest a doe every year.”

Contrary to chatter in coffee shops, shooting a doe doesn't make you less of a hunter, Kreil said. Instead, it demonstrates that you are an informed and conscientious hunter who understands that hunting is about wildlife management and not just about trophies.

Apparently, many North Dakota deer hunters understand this concept. In 2002, the Department offered nearly 117,000 licenses, the majority of which were doe licenses. People had two concerns: First, would hunters want the licenses? And, second, would they actually use the extra licenses to harvest does? In 2002, the answers were yes and yes. Nearly all the licenses were sold, with only about 1,500 remaining, and success rates for second and third antlerless licenses was nearly 78 percent.

These questions are still valid for 2003, with nearly 124,000 deer licenses available. Hopefully, the answers will once again be yes and yes, Kreil said.

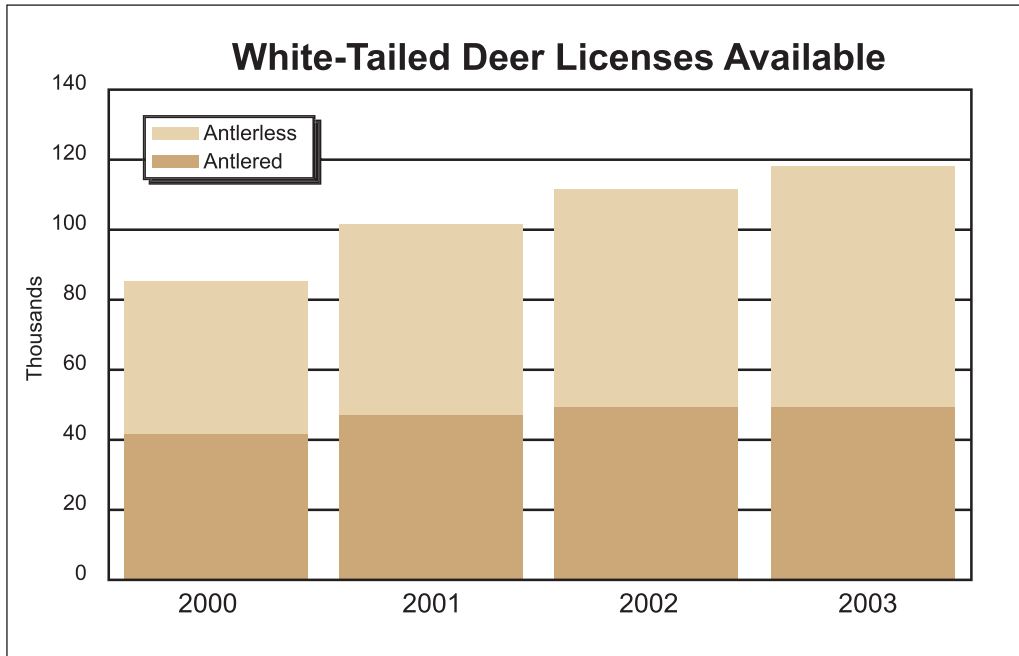
So, harvest a doe this fall. And if it takes venturing off the road farther than you'd like for an animal without antlers, invest in a game carrier, or simply a wheelbarrow.

"I have a photo of my son wheeling a doe out of the field on a homemade game carrier," Jensen said. "And he

was just 8 years old at the time."

That's a doe hunting story that can be told around a campfire.

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Using Doe Licenses

Hunters with second and third doe licenses can hunt early, late and often. These licenses can be used during the archery season with a bow; deer gun season with a bow, rifle, or muzzleloader; or during the muzzle-loader season with muzzle-loader.

These licenses must be used for antlerless deer only, and hunters must stay in the unit to which the license is assigned.